

Tags of the Dead

by Can'tStopTheSignal

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Summary: The Rat Patrol finds Dietrich in the desert, who needs their help.

Tags of the Dead

Normally once the Rats decimated a supply column, the hightailed it out of there, leaving Dietrich to pick up the dead. This time, however, they retreated to a nearby dune to check for movement down below. Their info stated that the Germans were carrying valuable maps and documents that their Allied commanders were interested in.

They knew if they waited too long, the Germans start looking for their missing convoy. After five minutes of nothing but drifting sand and black, oily smoke, Troy decided to risk sending them in. Leaving Tully and Moffitt to cover them, Hitch and Troy approached the ruins.

Troy had just found the briefcase when a shout from Hitch brought him out of the Kubelwagen.

"Sarge, I got some movement! Hands up. I said, hands up!"

Troy rushed to Hitch's side. A wirey German soldier sat next to a clearly dead body. He was hunched over the man, applying pressure to wounds that would never heal. His hair was full of sand and the little they could see of his face was covered in dust. The man's uniform was scorched and blackened, his skin showing horrifying burns.

"Keep your gun on him, Hitch, but I don't think he's moving anytime soon." Troy turned towards the hill and let out a sharp whistle.

"Moffitt, get down here."

Troy could have kicked himself. He knew that he should never assume and always check to make sure that there were no threats. Troy did a brief but thorough walk-through to check for any other survivors.

Moffitt and Tully had arrived by the time he got back.

"Talk to him Moffitt. Get him to drop any weapons and see if you can get a name."

"Soldat, was ist Ihr Name?" There was no response, other than the man dropping his head to rest on his dead companions chest and slightly rocking.

Moffitt tried again, "Soldat, was ist Ihr Name?" When that still gained no reaction, he decided to try a different route. "Achtung, lassen Sie Ihre Waffen."

"Sarge," said the normally laconic Tully, "I think he's shell shocked."

Moffitt looked back at Troy. "Sam, we can't leave him here in the sun. Who knows how long it will be until Dietrich starts looking for this convoy. He could be out here for hours, even days before he's found. In his current state, he won't last."

"I suppose we're taking him with. Let's get him on the jeep and shake it."

It was much easier said than done. Hitch stood back with his gun while Troy and Moffitt cautiously approached the German soldier. Closer, they could see that the man's holster was empty. Nodding at Moffitt, Troy bent down and put a firm but gentle hand on the man's left shoulder. Everyone was surprised when the German pivoted and slugged Troy in the face, dropping him to the ground.

Troy covered his face as best he could while the German continued to whale on him. Tully hurried to help Moffitt pull the man off Troy. It was like trying to hold on to a wild tiger. They were bit, scratched, hit, and cursed at. He was finally silenced when a blow to the head knocked him unconscious.

Tully caught him and gently lowered him to the sand. It was the first time that any of them had gotten a good look at his face.

"Dietrich?"

Even unconscious, the man looked grief-stricken. Sam ran a hand through his hair and looked at his fellow Rats. "This doesn't change anything. We take him with us. I'm sure command would love to question him. We'll just have to be extra cautious for escape attempts. Tie him up and load him."

Dietrich was lighter than Tully expected. They gently carried him to the jeep and put him in the back. When Tully tied the cord around Dietrich's wrists, he stirred and clutched unconsciously at Tully's sleeve. Tully leaned in closer to hear what Dietrich was muttering.

"Karl!"

The Kentuckian adjusted his helmet and chewed thoughtfully on his matchstick. The other three Rats were converged by Troy's jeep talking no doubt about the unexpected prisoner. He frowned,

disentangled Dietrich's hand, then decisively turned on his heel to go back to the dead man that Dietrich had previously been clinging to.

He had just grabbed the man's tags when he heard Troy give the order to, "Shake it!" He shoved the bits of metal into a pocket and jogged back to his jeep. He would look at them later.

Moffitt rode in the back with Dietrich to keep an eye on him and to keep him from falling out. For once, they were close to their own lines and it would only take them a few hours to reach their main camp.

Dietrich finally stirred when they were about a half hour from their destination. Moffitt put a hand on his handgun as a precaution. It was unneeded. Dietrich looked up briefly one time and then put his head back down. He seemed to curl back into himself. All attempts to start up a conversation by Moffitt were subsequently ignored by the Captain.

When they finally made camp, Tully volunteered to take Hauptmann Dietrich to the brig while Troy debriefed Colonel Anders. To anyone looking on it would seem like Tully had a hand on Dietrich's arm to keep track of him. In reality, Tully was supporting most of his weight. Dietrich was stumbling like a two-bit drunk.

Before leaving him in his room, Tully managed to slip the battered dog tags into the Captain's hand. Dietrich showed the first signs of being aware of his surroundings.

He cleared his dry throat and managed a quiet, "Danke," to the private. His eyes drew back down the the tags he cupped gingerly in his hand.

Tully nodded his understanding and left. When they had first arrived, Tully had taken a minute to examine the tags in the moonlight. They were sooty and hard to make out. Even without being able to read German, Tully had nonetheless been able to make out the dead man's name. Karl Dietrich.

Days later, Sergeant Troy was at his boiling point.

"What is Dietrich up to? He isn't talking, he isn't sleeping, he's barely eating, and there hasn't been one escape attempt. All he does is sit on his bunk staring at his damned tags." Troy kicked at a rock and swore.

"Maybe Tully was right," said Moffitt. "This is beginning to look more and more like a case of post-concussional syndrome. I'll talk to Colonel Anders. I think it might be best if he got shipped out to a POW camp in the US. I don't think sitting in the desert is going to help him any."

Troy wanted to be the one to inform Dietrich the news. He found the German sitting cross-legged on his bunk staring at the dog tags in his hands. Even in the few days that he had been there, it looked like he had lost weight. His normally thin frame was bordering on skeletal.

Troy cleared his throat. He received a brief, disinterested look from

the prisoner before he lowered his gaze again. Troy frowned. For a moment there, he could have sworn that he had seen a glimpse of dog tags underneath the Captain's shirt.

"Hauptmann," Troy started. There was no sign that he was heard. "Dietrich, I'm afraid the war's over for you. You're being shipped out to a POW camp in the States."

He waited for a response that wasn't coming. Finally, he let out a sign and left the man alone.

Tully waited until the Sergeant had left before entering the building himself. He leaned against the wall opposite from Dietrich.

"I asked Colonel Anders. You're being sent to Camp Breckinridge in Kentucky. You'll like it there. It's summer right now. It'll be hot and humid, just not as bad as here. You won't miss a thing."

"Pettigrew," Dietrich finally looked at him, his gaze bewildered.

"Yup, it's me. You should really eat something." He nodded at the untouched plate of food on the floor near the bed.

"Ich habe nicht Hunger."

"Stillâ€¦"

Dietrich reluctantly picked up the plate and started picking at the bread. Since pieces were actually making it into his mouth, Tully chose not to push it. He only hoped that once the man was out of the desert, he would regain his former spirit. As it was, this shell of a man was hardly the person the Rats had come to know and respect.

The war had ended. The Rats had come through the war mostly unscathed. Hitch had lost his hearing in his left ear from standing too close to an explosion. Troy had decided to do some traveling and Moffitt had since returned home to England.

Without Dietrich there, the desert had seemed more bare. They had relaxed their guard without someone challenging them mentally and keeping them on their toes. Tully had suffered for this.

A German convoy had caught them unaware and Tully's jeep flipped. Moffitt, who had been manning the gun, had been thrown clear. Tully hadn't been as lucky. The jeep had landed on his arm, pinning him. They had barely managed to get him clear and everybody on Troy's jeep without getting shot.

His arm had gotten infected on the way back. There were no convenient German aid camps that they could raid and their own medical supplies weren't enough to handle it. He ended up finishing the war five months earlier than the others, missing half his right arm.

Learning to cope with his loss had been hard. It had been especially hard on his aging parents and his now wife, Anna. He was supposed to take over the family farm, but he was having trouble doing everything with his off hand.

It would have been easy to become depressed or angry, and he was, on some days. His imperturbable personality was useful to weather the changes.

However, today was a special day. It had been running in the back of his mind since his time in Africa. Today they were releasing the POWs from Camp Breckinridge. He knew that some Germans were going straight home whereas others were choosing to stay in the States for a while longer.

He had been in contact with the camp's commander and had received periodic updates. He had arrived early in the morning to speak first with the commander, then with the only German prisoner that he had an interest in.

"Hello Hauptmann."

Dietrich had been called into the commander's office with no warning. There had been rumors floating around camp that they were to be released any day. The last thing that he had been expecting was one of his desert nemesis'.

"Private Pettigrew?"

"They promoted me to Corporal. Anyways, the war is over, call me Tully."

"And yet you call me Hauptmann."

"It just wouldn't seem right to call you anything else."

"My name is Hans. If you can't manage that, Dietrich is acceptable."

"As you wish. You seem much better than last we spoke."

Dietrich clutched a second pair of dog tags around his neck.

"Thank you for these," he said softly. "You were right, I do like it here. This camp was probably what I needed. We actually had food, good work, and peace and quiet. Best of all, no killing."

"Have you thought about what you want to do after you get out of here? Will you go back to Germany?"

"I do not know. I have nothing left for me there. All my family is dead. But I have nothing keeping me here either. At least it is familiar there." He leaned closer and his tanned face turned a shade whiter. "I have to ask you a question. I do not trust anyone else to tell me the truth. They had us watch a film when they began talking about our release. It was about camps, camps that were in Germany. Is it true?"

"I have not seen them myself. From all accounts, they were over in Germany. But I've talked to soldiers returning from Europe that have seen them first hand. They would only speak what they had seen when they were dead drunk. As much as I dislike the thought, I believe that the camps were real and more horrifying than anything imaginable."

"Mein Gott."

They both were silent for a while after that.

"I actually had a proposition for you. You are all being released later today and I'm going to be needing help on my farm." He brought his right arm forward from behind his body. It ended abruptly at the elbow. "That is, if you are interested. I have permission to spring you early."

"I should say that I need time to think about it, but I don't. I would be honored."

That night, two men, of different nationalities started to heal. Life was full of ups and downs, twists, and turns, but it had brought two opposing men together and they were better for it. They could understand the horrors that the other faced. Maybe not each other's exact situation, but better than anyone else around. And as one night was ending, their days were just beginning.

****AN: I apologize for any German that is wrong.****

****I tried to do some limited research so I apologize for anything that is incorrect. If you notice, Moffitt calls Dietrich's PTSD 'post-concussional syndrome.' According to my (brief) research, Britain had seen such an over diagnosis of 'Shell Shock' in WWI, that they had banned the term during WWII.****

****Most German POWs did really like life in the US. They were getting better food, paid for work, and built relationships with Americans, especially the people they worked with. According to one website (I'm not sure how accurate), POWs were supposed to watch a video over the concentration camps before they were released.****

****Hope you enjoyed it!****

End
file.